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PREVIEW

THE ASSAILED INDÍGENA IN FOUR MEXICAN NOVELS

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THE ASSAILED INDÍGENA IN FOUR MEXICAN NOVELS

by

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THESIS

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Acknowledgements..... | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Background Notes..... | 7 |
| Chapter 1..... | 10 |
| Commentary..... | 14 |
| Chapter 2..... | 23 |
| Commentary..... | 26 |
| Chapter 3..... | 33 |
| Commentary..... | 38 |
| Chapter 4..... | 53 |
| Commentary..... | 56 |
| Conclusion..... | 63 |
| Endnotes..... | 65 |
| Bibliography..... | 69 |
| Vita..... | 72 |

Introduction

Gregorio López y Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos and Ermilo Abreu Gómez dramatize the oppression and humiliation of the new world 'indígena' by the European conquerors. In El indio, by López y Fuentes; Balún Canán and Oficio de tinieblas, by Castellanos; and Canek by Abreu, the collision of two cultures--the obfuscation of two mythologies--defines the battle of the 'indígena' for survival in the face of an attack on his land, wealth, culture, and his very soul.

The land, revered by the 'indígena' and sacked by the European, is a constant theme in these works. The 'indígena' compares his way of life and his myth with that of the white man and embarks on an odyssey of acceptance and submission, sufferance of conquest, and, finally, a re-examination of his condition and identity. Throughout these works there is the desolation of the vanquished. Yet, in each story, there is the aura of expectation, the hope that from this chaos the Indian will re-discover his reality, reclaim what is his, and regain his dignity.

El indio reveals that it is impossible for the native to exist unfettered within the progress of Mexican

history. The 'indigena' faces extermination by the 'gente de razón'. Then, Balún Canán, Oficio de tinieblas, and Canek show the native fighting without weapons for what justice he can find. Finally, he embraces his past and his myth and, therein, his salvation from oblivion.

PREVIEW

Background Notes

It is impossible to come to terms with the events that followed the arrival of the European in Yucatán without investigating, to some extent, the circumstances of the Maya as they existed at the time of the Conquest.

The History of Francisco de Montejo first admiral of Yucatán relates that a 'Chilán', an orator who gives out responses of the demon told his people that a foreign race of people would soon rule the Maya in Yucatán. Don Juan Cocom, a prominent Mayan scholar and friend of Diego de Landa, showed this man an ancient book that had belonged to his grandfather;

In this was painted a deer, and his grandfather had told him that when there should come into the land large deer (for so they called the cows), the worship of the gods would cease; and this had been fulfilled, because the Spaniards had brought along large cows. (1)

The similarities between the Mayan and Christian religion may have been one reason for acceptance of the white man by the Indian. There were stories of a flood in their religious writings. They did penance and made pilgrimages. The cross was also a symbol of religious significance for the Maya;

The similarities were so striking that some Spaniards even suggested that St. Thomas had visited the land hundreds of years before on one of his missionary journeys. (2)

We learn from Friar Diego de Landa that populations were decimated by diseases such as smallpox brought by the European. Entire towns of the Indians were burned, sometimes leaving only twenty houses where once a thousand had stood.

The port town of Conil is said by one writer to have had 5,000 houses; in '79 Díaz Apulche, then 75 years old, says he witnessed the town burnings and that nearly all of the people died of grief or destitution; that it was all done by the official order of the Auditor López, in support of the friars' plan of removals for doctrination and church attendance. (3)

Miguel León Portilla details for us that the Maya's concept of time embraced his entire reality.

The relationship with the ancient myth was preserved and that which was belief and need for prediction became fused with rigorous measurements and computations. (4)

The Katún 8 Ahau was a point in time that recurred every 256 years. The Maya knew that at this time they would

have to leave their homes. This occurred exactly at the time that had been predicted when they were driven from Chichén Itzá, Chakanputún, Mayapán and at the end of the seventeenth century when the Spaniards conquered the Itzá at Tayasal. A very significant Katún was the Katún 6 Ahau which contained a series of omens. Each and every one of these omens predicted that the ancient way of life of the Maya was to come to an end.

In light of these glimpses at history it is no wonder that centuries later we find that the native is at the brink of annihilation. The novels of López y Fuentes, Castellanos, and Abréu show us that there is a hope that this annihilation will not occur.

Chapter I

El indio

El indio mexicano como agente de fuerzas superiores era el producto de un pasado de injusticias y de un presente desequilibrado y en desorden; pero seguía siendo la esperanza humana de aquella cultura que había hecho historia y creado mitos, y que ni la colonización ni el latifundismo habían logrado destruir y exterminar del todo. (5)

Antonio Magaña Esquivel

Antonio Magaña Esquivel, in his prologue to El indio, tells us that this novel represents the archetype of the native and that there is no determined character or figure who serves as a protagonist. Instead, the inhabitants of the village in the story are treated as a collective whole that reacts with fear when the white man arrives. Esquivel further states that the narrative unfolds in three time periods: the first is when the intruders come to the village in search of gold, the second involves a revenge of the villagers upon the strangers, and the third deals with the misfortune of the native who serves as guide to the white men and who is left helplessly crippled. Magaña further proposes that López y Fuentes does not openly formulate his 'indigenista' theory, but

rather states it in the novelistic manner through the words of the professor who defends the 'natural', as López y Fuentes refers to the native.

The story opens with a narrative by an elder of an Indian tribe whose territory lies isolated in the highlands of the country. The old man tells of the grandfathers who chose this place so as to be far away from the Europeans. Three white men arrive in search of gold and curative herbs. Although the natives tell them there is no gold, they persist in seeking it out and demand a guide. During their stay at the 'ranchería' or village, one of the 'forasteros', white men, attempts to rape a young Indian girl, but she escapes. The men proceed, determined to find treasure. They insist that the guide reveal the location of the gold, and when he is unable to do so they torture him. The guide escapes but in his flight falls down an embankment and is totally mangled.

The attempted rape of the girl and the crippling of the youth rouse the natives into action to seek revenge. They kill one of the 'forasteros', and for fear of punishment by the whites they abandon the 'ranchería'. Several of the officials from the municipality of the

'forasteros' come to the village in search of the guilty natives but find the place abandoned. Among these officials are a hostile secretary of the mayor and a sympathetic professor who defend the 'naturales'. Nothing is settled, and the natives return to the 'ranchería'.

The Mexican movement for land reform and education coincides with the foregoing events and the landowners begin to counter with the threat of war and the annihilation of the native.

A leader, himself a 'natural', comes to the aid of his people and is successful in providing an inroad for the acquisition of their rights. Nevertheless, conditions of war ensue between the Indian and the white man.

The story ends with the maimed 'indígena' at his outpost, and another native higher up in the hills. Both are lookouts on the alert, still fearful, distrustful and vigilant.

In the passage that follows we see the 'indígena' as the victim of longstanding persecution.

El viejo dice que la tribu no tiene muchos años aquí. Sus abuelos que eran muy poderosos vivieron en el valle donde señorearon a otros pueblos. Huyendo de los blancos que los perseguían dejaron las tierras buenas de los

valles por estas que aunque ingratas les ofrecen
más protección. (6)

PREVIEW

Commentary

The first episode finds the Indians giving food and lodging to three white men who have come seeking treasure. A symbol of the humiliation of the native is seen in the 'baratijas' that the whites offer for sale---worthless trinkets. Gregorio López y Fuentes exposes in detail the peonage that came about with the appearance of the European and also the tenacity with which the European continued to hold on to this peonage even to this century. The labor of the 'natural', as López y Fuentes refers to him, is vividly described as he cuts and processes sugar cane, tends the beasts of burden and packages 'piloncillo', a basic food product. At the end of the week he hardly has enough to sustain his family's most basic needs:

Y al final de la semana, una liquidación que no alcanza ni para la manta con que la mujer haga calzones y camisa a los muchachos, si es que el trabajo no fue en solvencia de una vieja deuda. Siempre la misma desproporción entre el salario y las necesidades; ¡un señuelo que no se alcanza nunca! (7)

In the attempted rape of the native girl by the young 'forastero' we see again the humiliation of the 'indígena'. He yields after his initial outrage when the